




RHETORIC, POLITICS AND SOCIETY



**Donald Trump and the
Kayfabe Presidency**
Professional Wrestling
Rhetoric in the White House

Shannon Bow O'Brien

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I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Bill O'Brien.

PREFACE

Kayfabe. If you are reading this book, you probably have noticed that word in the title. I would like to address it immediately to clear up any concerns about terminology. Persons familiar with professional wrestling language already know the term. For the rest of us, it is likely you have never heard or seen reference toward in society. Kayfabe refers to wrestlers maintaining the entire situation is absolute real without any hint of performance. For actors, it is referred to as being “in character.” Kayfabe thus is the illusion that everything is utterly sincere and authentic when it is all just an act.

Humans like myths and fictions. One of the snippets from graduate school I always remember involves Clifford Geertz’s concept of fiction (Geertz 1973). In simple terms, your head is full of all your experiences. It is a melon with every birthday party, every heartbreak, every triumph, every meal, every boring moment, and a multitude of other things all crammed into it. When we witness an event and then recount it, we create fiction. We see a thing, it goes into our noggin, and the description that comes out is filtered through the black box of all our cumulative experiences. We have no way to prove or disprove our fifth grade snack time impacted our word choices as we recount an event. Our perception, even with innocuous events, affects the descriptive quality of the recollection. When two people standing side by side witness the exact same thing, their accounts will always vary albeit in usually minor ways. This imperfect recall is ultimately fiction because of its personalized explanation.

But I digress... People like stories. They give us ways to provide context for difficult to understand ideas and concepts. Myths help us organize the complex into understandable and relatable. Fictions give us the ability to express these thoughts into coherent frames that feel relatable. We do not like stories to feel like a Jackson Pollock painting with thoughts going everywhere. We like them to have an arc with a beginning, middle, and end.

Most of our stories, especially theatrical ones, are hyperbolic. Most visual entertainment has about two hours to introduce characters, create conflict, tell a story, and resolve issues. It is really a short amount of time to accomplish all those ideas. In real life, situations unfold over months and years, not minutes. Therefore, stories have to be larger than life, with their characters presented in broad stereotypical terms so people recognize them as heroes or villains. Events have to be compressed to advance storylines. We accept these notions within a theater because they are part of the experience.

I sincerely hope I do not destroy many people's worldviews when I state that the majority of professional wrestling is scripted. Most professional wrestling exists as a pre-written story where the athletes execute a ceremonial dance of sorts where their success or failure hinges upon their ability to sell their performance to the audience. Achievement hinges upon eliciting emotion from the viewers. Cheering and booing are the same as long as they are sincere and voracious. The wrestling ring is less of an athletic arena and more of a thrust theater. The wrestlers emerge from the curtain with a walkway that connects the ring to the upstage end. As common with this theater style, the stage, in this case, the ring allows for action to be viewed from three sides. Athleticism is part of the performance, but usually takes a backseat to the dialogue which advances plot lines or defines alliances or antagonisms. Wrestlers use the ring as a forum to address grievances, posture, or manipulate situations to create audience reaction.

These experiences bring us back to kayfabe. While in front of the audience, kayfabe overrides all other issues and concerns. The only major exception when kayfabe is ignored involves serious injury to one of the performers. Understanding Donald Trump requires familiarity with professional wrestling. His first major exposure to large audiences occurred through this medium. He has had a close association with professional wrestling going back to the early 1980s. He is in the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)'s Hall of Fame. He has been integral to

several of their storylines over the years. He exists as the character of Mr. Trump in their universe which leads me to some of the basic ideas of this book.

Wrestling is unique because the performers exist with a duality of person. For example, there is the man, John Cena, who has a family, friends, and a private life completely unrelated to wrestling. Simultaneously, a professional wrestling character is named John Cena (played by the man John Cena) who has alliances, enemies, feuds, and conflicts played out on television for our entertainment. Both can be separate, but both also overlap. The character John Cena likely shares many traits with the real man, but often in an exaggerated state. Personality aspects are embellished and reactions are overstated. The character has to move forward a storyline for an audience while the person simply lives a life. Under the rules of kayfabe, this difference does not exist. Person and character are interchangeable with no clear division. The audience often intuitively understands the difference, but many of them accept the utter reality of the world presented to them.

Historically, wrestlers maintained kayfabe under all circumstances. The audience was given the impression no separation existed between stage and personal lives. One of the biggest breaks in kayfabe occurred when the Iron Sheik (who was notoriously anti-American) was arrested with Jim Duggan (who was extremely American patriotic) in the 1980s ("Two Wrestlers," 1987). Fans were shocked either man had a cordial personal relationship with the other since their characters were mortal enemies. The mirage of kayfabe has wavered a bit in the last several decades. The internet, social media, and the expansion of wrestling into an international medium has allowed for cracks to emerge in the illusion. Fans often revel in the "inside" information in part because it helps draw them into the experience. Outsiders only see the performance at face value and lack the ability to grasp the nuance and interplay that comes with the true understanding of what is actually occurring in front of them.

One of the goals of this project is to establish the idea that Donald Trump vigorously maintains kayfabe as the president to the point the two aspects have merged. His rhetorical style has been heavily influenced by professional wrestling. His close association since the 1980s means this media form is where he "cut his teeth" as a public persona. Wrestling has many aspects that Donald Trump trades on within the public sphere. Verbal aggression, name-calling, refusing to admit fault, never apologizing, and always doubling down are all stock and trade

wrestling mannerisms. Wrestling frequently presents a world of protagonists and antagonists with little to no gray area between the two positions. People may flip sides, but do not exist in the space between. He built a campaign and now a presidency around this concept of kayfabe. Any challengers to his point of view or administration are labeled as enemies or denounced in extremely negative terms. Allies who change positions into either neutral or negative positions are quickly dismissed as tangential with limited knowledge or access. They are also regularly verbally attacked as a way to marginalize their opinions. These tactics all originate within the archetypical storylines of professional wrestling.

This book attempts to tackle these ideas in several ways. It will explore Donald Trump's connection to wrestling and how he has used wrestling tactics both as a candidate and president. It will also look at a couple of other famous individuals over history that used media in ways to forward themselves as political candidates. It will also explore ideas of how manufactured realities and how they play a role in this entire perspective. Finally, it will look at the first two years of the Trump administration and how he has weaponized the use of going public for his own means. In particular, it will highlight how his speechmaking patterns compare to other administrations. More important, it will show how the administration has systematically eliminated certain types of speeches out of the public record in what I believe functions as a way to manufacture a specific legacy and reality for the archives which may not gel with actual reality.

Austin, USA

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ideas, books, papers, and other works rarely start out as cohesive pieces. The ideas for this project span over twenty years of events in my life. In many ways, this begins because my friend Melissa Dimeny helped me get the job in Budapest, Hungary for a year. It changed who I was and in a roundabout way set me on my academic path. American professional wrestling ran on Friday nights in Hungary. Wrestling was my weekly ritual. I would make dinner and then turn on wrestling. It was one of my few windows of the world I had left. I watched it as a way to hear American English and escape for a few hours. My time in Budapest allowed me space to really think about what I wanted in life. It was teaching there for a year that made me realize I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. I missed the challenge of academia.

I drifted away from wrestling during my Ph.D. program. As many others can probably attest, you do not have the time to watch much television in a doctoral program. I did not think about professional wrestling in the next 15 years. My past became my future when Donald Trump began his run for president. Throughout his campaign, I began to get that itch in the back of your brain reminding me I had seen something like this at another time. Eventually, I noticed many of the methods, language, tactics, and verbal spars were almost exactly like professional wrestling. I had a vague recollection Donald Trump had some involvement in the genre but did not remember details. With a bit of research, I realized he had deep and lasting roots in the sport. Many of his earliest large audience

interactions were associated with professional wrestling. When I filtered him through this lens, his actions and behaviors seemed to conform to the expectations of the ring.

I became interested in publishing a piece on wrestling about Donald Trump. I worked on several ideas about it and approached a couple of colleagues. Bartholomew Sparrow, Joe Amick, and I were also interested in characteristics of voters in counties that voted for Trump in the primaries. While we hope to collect more data to continue this project after the 2020 election, the wrestling material ultimately did not fit within the research. I decided to work on it independently and started developing journal papers for conferences. The feedback I received at my panels at the American Political Science Association, Midwest Political Science Association, and Southern Political Science Association was invaluable. One person I would like to specifically single out is Richard W. Waterman. He and I worked together at Advanced Placement readings for years. We also see each other at conference panels. His comments about my conference paper really helped push me to decide to pursue publishing this project as a book. After a panel, he came up and told me when he saw the title of the paper, he thought I had finally lost it and had taken a turn around the bend. After listening to my presentation, he was onboard with the ideas and thought they had merit. He then asked me to send him a copy of the paper for his students to read in class that semester. As an academic, I could ask for no higher praise. We all pursue ideas because we think there exist some truth within them. We aim to share our views with others to better understand the world.

Many of my friends and colleagues over the past several years have had to listen to me explain wrestling and why I think it matters to understanding the Trump administration. Their patience and insightful comments have been invaluable. Many of them, like Ivana Veljkovic, Jacob Straus, and Michael Anderson have helped point me in directions I had not previously considered and their recommendations made a difference in the final project.